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DE RUEHDT #0363/01 1941106
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FM AMEMBASSY DILI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2796
INFO RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
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RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 0041
RUEHDT/AMEMBASSY DILI 2122

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DILI 000363

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 7/13/2016

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SUBJECT: BISHOP NASCIMENTO IS WORRIED, BUT WILLING TO HELP

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CLASSIFIED BY: Grover Joseph Rees, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy
Dili, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

(1) (C) Summary: Bishop Basilio Nascimento of Baucau told Ambassador Rees that the new government led by Jose Ramos-Horta is a positive development that will help to restore confidence in government, but that he remains deeply concerned about the future. He cited the armed forces, the police, the Fretilin leadership, and popular dissatisfaction with some aspects of the presence of international forces as possible sources of future trouble. Although the Bishop is a close friend and frequent advisor of the Prime Minister and hopes to work closely with him to restore peace and stability, he said that both Ramos-Horta and President Xanana Gusmao have a tendency to compromise even when the situation calls for taking a stand. He said the situation in Baucau and other eastern districts is calm, in part because of the Church's efforts, although he has heard credible reports of armed groups of Fretilin militants. The Bishop said that recent reverses might force the Fretilin leadership to come to terms with reality, which would be a positive development. He denied that the Church had endorsed or participated in the large anti-Alkatiri demonstration in late June that may have been a factor in bringing about the Prime Minister's resignation. End Summary.

(2) (C) Ambassador met with Bishop Nascimento on Monday, July 10, in Dili, a few hours after the swearing-in ceremony for Prime Minister Jose Ramos Horta. Bishop Nascimento and his colleague, Bishop Alberto Ricardo DaSilva of Dili, had been seated in the front row along with the new officials themselves, the President of Parliament, and the President of the Court of Appeals. In his address to the nation, Ramos-Horta had singled out the two Bishops for praise, had promised to work closely with the Church on rebuilding the social fabric, and had outlined an agenda for his new Government --- anti-corruption, poverty alleviation, free and fair elections, the rule of law, and the necessity for Timorese to love one another --- that might as well have been written by Bishop Nascimento himself.

Despite all this, and despite his close friendship with Ramos-Horta, when Ambassador asked what he thought of the new Government the Bishop responded, "I am worried."

(3) (C) Bishop Nascimento said he was worried about three sets of problems: first, the "disposition" of the Timorese armed forces (FDTL) and police (PNTL). He said that "they are injured, some of them physically, all of them spiritually. And now they see foreigners doing their job. It cannot make them very happy."

(4) (C) The Bishop also expressed concern about the future behavior of the Fretilin party leadership. He said he had met with a delegation of what he called "radical" Fretilin leaders led by Jose Reis, Secretary of State for the eastern region. Nascimento said the delegation had expressed Fretilin's willingness to work with the Church and with others whom the Alkatiri government had alienated, but that when it got down to specifics, "They don't recognize that they have done wrong. They are still unhappy with the selection of Ramos Horta, and they still talk about Xanana organizing a coup d'etat" to depose former Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

(5) (C/NF) Finally, the Bishop expressed the concern that the international forces, particularly those of Australia, might soon wear out their welcome. He said that on the one hand, ordinary Timorese are dissatisfied that the international forces have not had the pervasive presence in neighborhoods that they believe is necessary to deter arson, looting, and other crimes. At the same time, the Bishop said people resent what they see as the arbitrary and authoritarian attitude of the Australian armed forces: "They came here to help us, not to order us around." He noted that the Australian forces had not been accused of human rights violations, whereas the Portuguese paramilitary police (GNR) had been accused of beating people including anti-Fretilin demonstrators. But he said people think that "when the GNR beats us, they beat on the occasion of the errors," whereas the Australians sometimes seem suspicious and hostile toward people who have done nothing wrong and about whom there appears to be no particular reason for concern.

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(6) (U) Despite these concerns, Bishop Nascimento said that the swearing-in of Ramos-Horta was a positive development that would reduce tension. He said he hoped the Ramos-Horta government would be able to create conditions that would persuade people to return to their homes, and that he and Bishop Ricardo would enthusiastically accept the government's invitation to work together on creating such conditions. He added, however, that he believed Ramos-Horta's program was awfully ambitious for the nine months the new Government is expected to serve.

(7) (C) Bishop Nascimento acknowledged that he has long been a close friend of Ramos-Horta and that the new Prime Minister often asks him for advice. However, he expressed the concern that the instincts of both Ramos-Horta and President Gusmao are "always to compromise --- to equilibrate between Almighty God and the devil. I don't know if this is always a good idea. It sets bad precedents." He cited the example of the truth and reconciliation process in which, instead of being genuinely sorry for their crimes and seeking forgiveness from the community --- forgiveness which he said would have been forthcoming if the apologies had been sincere --- too many perpetrators were successful in striking deals by justifying or minimizing what they had done. So in the end there was no justice and no real reconciliation either. The Bishop suggested that Ramos-Horta, who had always been in positions where his job was essentially to be a negotiator, might have to change his approach now that he is the country's chief executive officer, since "he has to take a position."

(8) (C) Asked about the security situation in the eastern part of the country, Bishop Nascimento said it was generally calm, but that people are worried about reports of armed groups of Fretilin militants in their areas. "I hear 40 automatic weapons

in Baucau, 60 in Viqueque, and 80 in Los Palos." He said he did not know whether these reports were true, but that they were believable, since the details tended to be similar to those that emerged in the case of the armed group in Liquica led by Rai Los, and that he had heard these details before the Rai Los story became public knowledge. Bishop Nascimento also said that he had heard reports that elements of FDTL were training a large group of armed men near Baucau, but that "priests have been looking for specific information and have not found any." He said a major factor in keeping the eastern districts calm was that the Church had made frequent appeals to local leaders, to FDTL, and to problematic nongovernmental actors such as ex-guerrilla leader Cornelio Gama ("L7").

(9) (C) Despite his concerns, Bishop Nascimento said that it was a good thing that former Prime Minister Alkatiri and his associates had attempted to assemble a large group of pro-Alkatiri demonstrators from the eastern districts to come to Dili. He said the pro-Alkatiri leaders had been expecting 20,000 people or more --- they had been hoping for a crowd larger than the recent anti-Alkatiri demonstration that may have been a factor in Alkatiri's resignation --- but had only been able to draw about 3000. "Many people, including Fretilin supporters, refused to come. They belong to Fretilin, but they do not agree with Alkatiri and Lu'Olo." Bishop Nascimento also said that if there had been a secret ballot at the Fretilin Congress in May, reformist challenger Jose Luis Guterres would have won. "Many delegates from the Congress confirmed this to me. They wanted change, but they were afraid to vote their consciences in public. Alkatiri and Lu'Olo know this too, so maybe now the radical Fretilin leaders will be more in touch with reality."

(10) (SBU) Asked about reports that the Church had encouraged or participated in the recent anti-Alkatiri demonstration, Bishop Nascimento said there may have been participation by local parish priests acting on their own --- he noted that priests are "members of their communities" and that there were many communities in which the people had been virtually unanimous in believing that Alkatiri must step down in order to restore peace and stability --- but that neither he nor Bishop Ricardo had taken a position for or against the demonstration or done anything to encourage it.

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(11) (U) Comment: Bishop Nascimento is among the most astute and informed social and political observers in East Timor. His pessimistic observations, coming as they did on a day that appeared to present many reasons for optimism, are worth noting.

It may be even more important, however, that he is more than willing to accept the new Government's invitation to help rebuild the country. End Comment.

REES